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ABSTRACT

The Easy Steps to Reading Independence (ESTRI) Program is a reading program to be used to support whole language or basal reader programs by enabling limited ability or non-readers to begin reading, or to remediate reading disabilities, at age and grade appropriate levels immediately, without requiring the students to know sight words before entering the program. The philosophy behind ESTRI is that students use the same skills in reading and writing as they do in listening and speaking. ESTRI provides a simplified method for decoding unknown words, taking a cumulative and spiral approach to introducing the phoneme/grapheme correspondences, using the specific rule for identifying syllables in printed words that each syllable of the word contains a vowel sound, which appears in 5 ways in the English language. ESTRI could prove to be a valuable tool in helping magnet schools accomplish their mission. ESTRI is part of the New York State Education Department's validation and dissemination network. (Contains 10 references.) (Author/CR)

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EASY STEPS TO READING INDEPENDENCE
(ESTRI)

by

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Abstract

The Easy Steps to Reading Independence (ESTRI) program is a reading support system appropriate for both whole language and basal reader developmental programs. Limited ability or non-readers who do not know sight words begin reading or have their reading disabilities remediated immediately at age and grade appropriate levels. ESTRI is part of the New York State Education Department's Validation and dissemination network.

The Easy Steps to Reading Independence (ESTRI) Program is a reading support program to be used to support the whole language or basal reader program by enabling limited-reading ability or non-reader students to begin reading, or remediate reading disabilities, at age and grade-appropriate levels immediately, without requiring the students to know sight words before entering the program. The current program reflects the belief that: (1) students must first be supported to develop listening and speaking skills, vocabulary development and enrichment and higher level thinking skills in the English language. Students react initially within the context of their own linguistic environment rather than within a language environment that is unfamiliar to them. Their use of oral language grows and is used to develop language acquisition, production, recognition, prediction, and reading/writing abilities. (2) Students use the same skills in listening and speaking communication as they do in reading and writing; (3) the communication code for reading and writing requires facility in the use of the alphabetic code, which is best taught in a spiral and cumulative manner using a simplified decoding method; (4) students can begin learning to read using grade and age-appropriate materials and are not unsurmountably handicapped because they did not master reading skills in the earlier years, or because they did not receive early intervention.

The public's view of public schools. Some of the public's chief complaints about the schools reflect what it sees as glaring defects: youngsters graduating without minimal basic skills, truancy, diplomas for attendance. Karp (1997) recounts that, of a typical freshman class in his New Jersey high school of 700 to 800 students, the graduating

seniors is closer to 300. Young people without good skills don't get good jobs. Wadsworth (1997) cites the case of a participant in an Albuquerque focus group stating, "I see an awful lot of kids graduating from high school, putting in applications at my place of work, and they can't even fill out the forms. But they have graduated. It's very disturbing."

Surveys carried out by Public Agenda, an educational research agency in New York City, show that more than 80 percent of the respondents have said it is absolutely essential for schools to teach, at the minimum, basic skills in reading and math, and good work habits such as being responsible, being on time, and being disciplined (Wadsworth, 1997).

The "schools problem" exists because, over the years, skills requirements in the labor market have accelerated much faster than the schools have improved. Maintaining the status quo means maintaining this trend, a growing gap between what students learn and what good jobs require. Murnane and Levy (1997) claim that the basic skills that high wage employers demand include: (1) 'hard skills,' such as basic mathematics, problem solving, and reading abilities, much higher than almost half of today's high school graduates attain, (2) 'soft skills,' such as the ability to work in groups with persons of different backgrounds and to make effective oral and written presentations, and (3) the ability to use personal computers to carry out simple tasks, such as word processing. The new basic skills are not only necessary for economic prosperity in a changing economy, they are also important to citizenship in a pluralistic democracy which requires the ability to communicate effectively, both orally and in writing.

Last spring, the nation's governors and representatives from 47 corporations met in Palisades, New York, to "grade" public schools and recommend steps to improve them. Collectively, participants at this education summit called for higher standards across K-12 education. The winter before the 1996 summit, the Grand Rapids Press published an article telling of Michigan's plan to disperse money to school districts on the basis of achievement in test scores. The premise was simple: schools that do their jobs get paid; schools that don't, won't (Wadsworth, 1997). Pacific Telesis executive, Sam Ginn, tells audiences about the time his company tested 6,400 job applicants and only 800 passed, proving, according to Ginn, the failure of American public education.

Low test scores in reading on the 1994 National Assessment of

Educational Progress (NAEP) fueled the controversial debate. According to these scores, most U.S. students can decode and comprehend literally; they can read at basic levels. However, they have difficulty thinking about and constructing knowledge from the information they have read.

Education reform in New Jersey since the late 1970s has been driven by ever more demanding skills-based instruction and test-driven assessment (Karp, 1997). Proficiency testing and graduate exit exams have refocused the curriculum in an effort to"raise standards" and guarantee the knowledge value of a high school diploma. Students must pass high stakes exams in writing, reading and math to graduate State curriculum standards and more tests are being developed, all in the name of preparing students for the high tech future and job market.

Failure of schools to meet the challenge. Karp (1977) cites several problems characterizing the emphasis on basic skills approach to schooling. In urban, poverty area schools, students are not passing the tests despite years of remediation, test-based instruction and curriculum "realignment." Paterson, New Jersey, which was one of the first districts in the nation taken over by the state, has mobilized all its resources in the past five years for a strategy that increased "time on task" in basic skills and eliminated music, art and other "extras" for students who were not passing the tests. The results to date have been minimal, not because administrators and staff have not emphasized skills, but because the problems of student achievement in poor districts run much deeper. Karp (1997) suggests that, in many ways, schools are structured to reproduce inequality through, for example, tracking. Demand for basic skills creates a kind of "dittoland," where worksheets and other test-prep materials drive richer experience out of the classroom. Basic skills demands have a way of turning into mind-numbing instruction practices that encourage passivity and promote fragmented curriculum.

Schools attempt to downplay failure. Karp (1997) protests education for skills training. He holds that education is the development of individual capacity and competence in the context of increasingly complex levels of content and meaningful activity. The skills students need in poor communities and communities of color must be delivered in a rich context through a classroom that is rigorous and relevant and takes both social context of schooling and students' lives as

primary points of departure. According to Molnar (1997), grade levels for children of elementary and middle school age should be eliminated so that what children are taught better fits their development and interests. Secondary education as we know it should be dismantled and replaced with educational activities much more integrated with the political, social cultural and economic activities of students . Standardized tests are isolated indicators on a given day that provide little information for improving instruction and learning.

In such a no-demands, soft, play atmosphere, students will be kept happy and schools will have no responsibility to prepare students to meet the needs of the knowledge explosion that is going on in the technological world in which they must live. However, an employer hires an employee because of the skills and knowledge the employer believes the employee will bring to his business to make the business more successful with good potential for growth and meeting competition in the open market. National and state objectives for science and mathematics are clear: scientific literacy and mathematical power for all.

At this moment, the United States is the world's richest country. Yet, the U.S. has the greatest gap between rich and poor in the industrial world and the highest rate of childhood poverty (Wadsworth, 1997). Educational reformers, such as Murnane and Levy (1997) want schools to address the disparity in American income by teaching what they call the "new basic skills." Armed with these skills, students will be able to find well-paying jobs and secure a place in the middle class. Skills can prepare workers for the "high-skills-high tech" economy of the future through school-to-work, youth apprenticeship, or other work-related curriculum efforts. Murnane and Levy interpret economic data, especially the highest employment-to-population ratio in the last 50 years, as evidence that there will be jobs in the foreseeable future, and good jobs, for workers who have mastered the new basic skills.

Magnet schools. When magnet schools first appeared on the education scene over two decades ago, they were conceived to be a voluntary component of mandatory desegregation efforts, primarily in urban school districts. It was hoped that students would decide to attend magnet schools, even if they were located far from home, because of what they gained through the specialized programs that these schools provided, that these schools made the investment in time

and travel worthwhile. This remains the fundamental purpose of magnet schools today. Judith Stein, Director of Development for Magnet Schools of America (MSA), points out that magnet schools provide choice within existing state laws and local regulations covering public education. Christine Rossell, a political science professor at Boston University, has been studying magnet schools since they became part of the education system in 1976. She finds that magnet schools may be able to justify their increased expenditure over public schools, which they require to maintain their specialized curriculum, by showing that magnet schools boost student achievement, extending understanding through the use of best practices, identifying best practices for teaching and learning, best use of resources within the school, as well as outside of it. Questions of concern include what are the most effective forms of expert assessment to support best practices? How can teachers best use students' cultural and linguistic backgrounds to promote learning? What practices are most effective in building a sense of community among a culturally diverse student population?

Concerns in teaching reading. After reviewing extensive research and hearing testimony from many reading and curriculum experts, a task force set up by the California Department of Education recommended that teachers use a "systematic skills instruction program." The state's recent advisory on how to teach reading emphasizes instruction in phonemic awareness, the ability to hear and manipulate the discrete sound chunks of words, letter names and forms, and systematic, explicit phonics (letter/sound correspondences) (Routman, 1997). However, just teaching students how to decode words and not how to read and write for meaning and thinking critically will continue to produce disappointing results in reading achievement and will continue the trend of students who are unable to use reading and writing for problem solving in the world.

Phonics-first advocates believe that phonics teaching must be systematic and intense and that phonics knowledge must precede reading. Whole language advocates place phonics and skills in the context of reading whole and predictable texts and view phonics as one of the many cuing systems along with the meaning and structure of the text that readers use. Whole language is difficult to define. In a whole language classroom, learners are continually supported to purposefully use many subject areas and contexts. Students inquire into construct

and evaluate their own understanding of texts and real world issues. Phonics is systematic and not open to interpretation and discussion. Many educators misinterpret whole language to mean that all you need to do is immerse students in books and they will learn to read as easily as they learn to speak. Phonics has always been a part of whole language.

Many school districts simply changed basal reading texts and accompanying workbooks for children's literature and free choice writing. Some students enter school ready for phonics to make sense, but others do not. Increasingly, more and more unprepared children appear to be entering school and they often struggle with learning phonics and making sense of texts. Although the student might benefit from phonics, even more so, the student needs a volunteer to read to him so he becomes familiar with, understands, and enjoys the cadence and rhythms and words of storybook language (Carbo, 1997).

Invented spelling of emerging writers. Routman (1997) points out that people often view invented spellings as an indication of negligent and poor teaching. They don't realize that students' approximations inform teachers of the students' stage of development, how much practice is needed and what needs to be taught and demonstrated next. Although invented spelling might be excusable when students are first overcoming their temerity involved in putting their thoughts on paper, they should be taught the proper spelling of the words sometime before they leave formal education. This does not happen in many cases where students continue to show a halting grasp of the rules of spelling and grammar in the world of work. When some educators imply that spelling and grammar do not matter, they contribute to destroying the credibility and rigor of successful language teaching.

Easy Steps to Reading Independence (ESTRI). The ESTRI program is a support program which enables the student to read at grade and age appropriate levels immediately without requiring the student to know sight words before entering the program. The philosophy behind ESTRI is that students use the same skills in reading and writing as they do in listening and speaking. Reading is getting meaning from the printed page. From the beginning, students can read pictures, charts and graphs and answer such questions as: What does

the picture show? What is the main idea of the picture? What are the supporting details? What had to be there that the picture doesn't show? What can you tell from the picture about....(depending on the picture)? How can you change this (depending on the picture)?

The ability to get data from graphic material should not be downplayed and can be raised to a high level. For example, a surgeon will not operate until he looks at the x-ray, and the x-ray is a picture; the architect will not build until he consults the blueprint, and the blueprint is a picture. From the beginning students can use their higher level thinking skills to answer and pose meaningful questions.

In order to read independently at appropriate grade and age level, however, students need to be able to decode and encode words at the appropriate level. They must know enough words on the page to get to the meaning of the printed material on the page. There are only two ways they can learn these words, either by memorizing them as sight words or by having a way to figure them out, to decode them.

For some students, English is not their dominant language, or they might come from a dysfunctional home, or they may have trouble memorizing. At grade 4 and above, there are too many words to try to memorize and still operate independently at appropriate grade level. ESTRI provides a simplified method for decoding unknown words. Words that have been decoded several times tend to become sight words. Students are enabled to use a simplified word decoding process that presents no "exceptions to the rule." By using this skill, they soon develop the habit and word decoding becomes 'doable' for them.

English does present irregularities in its orthography, but students are taught a way to figure out irregular words, words that do not follow the rule. In decoding, students arrive at either the word itself, or a close enough approximation to the word, that, since they are reading in context, they can modify their articulation of the word and arrive at its correct pronunciation. In this way, from the beginning, emphasis is placed on word meaning and vocabulary expansion. Students can be approached at their appropriate grade and age, whether reading disabled or non-reader, because they can orally discuss what they are unable , at the moment, to read.

ESTRI takes a cumulative and spiral approach to introducing the phoneme/grapheme correspondences., using the specific rule for identifying syllables in printed words, that each syllable of the word contains a vowel sound, which appears in five ways in the English

language. Students grow in ability to chain syllables together the way they come in the word. When they decode the word, if they do not know the meaning of the word, they look up its meaning in the dictionary or they are told the meaning of the word, but at least they are able to get past the impasse of not being able to recognize the unknown word.

The ESTRI program was used with reading disabled students in grades 1 through 4 in a poor, densely populated section of New York City. After the children received instruction in the program for 14 days, class time of 40 minutes, 5 days a week, they were asked to state their feelings about the ESTRI program. Following is taken from what they wrote:

Grade 1:
Student 1: I like estRI.
Student 2: I like ESTRI be caz it is my favyret.
Student 3: I like ESTRI be cus is nias and is my f 1-10
Student 4: I like ESTRI
Student 5: I like the tip be kiz it help t sid the sndz

Grade 2
Student 1: I like ESTRI Beceuse it help me in Spelling. I like Estri t Help me in math.
Student 2: I like Estri because it wil help you to do your work

Grade 3
Student 1: I like Estri Becaue it mad me feal like a four grater.
Student 2: I like the EStRi becuz is fun. It lets me learn the words.

Grade 4

Student 1: I love the ESTRI Program Because it helped me alot to read more better than I used to. I like the Teachr, my classmates and how it help me in many ways to speak correct English read words correctly and helped me under stand subjects when I had problems figeuring out words.

Student 2: Yes, I liked these ESTRI program bcause the program helped me alot and from those days on, I was abale to read and the teacher was kind. Befor I was in these class, I do not know how to spll a word or read a word on til now.

Student 3: I like the pargam Becase it teach us to learn about vowels and to no how to sound a word that we dont no. And the musc that is on the tape. Befor I could not spelld a word in the class, I was thinking about the sounds and I got it.

Conclusion. Some critics wonder if magnet schools can deliver on their promise both to attain racial balance in schools and enhance student achievement. ESTRI could prove to be a viable tool in helping magnet schools accomplish their mission. Stan Pogrow (1996) states, "Large-scale reform requires highly specific, systematic, and structural methodology with supporting materials of tremendously high qualify" (pg. 52). While materials of high quality are desirable, ESTRI, using printed materials from neighborhood banks and stores, can be used to help students to identify with what is available and going on in their own neighborhoods.

The best chance for solving the complex issues facing public education is for increased dialogue among public officials, business people, and educators. All three groups include parents, people who have a vested interest in quality education. Business people and political officials can see the big picture and determine what skills and knowledge productive workers and good citizens need. Educators, given their expertise, can best figure out how to fulfill these needs. Continuing professional development in the teaching of phonics., spelling and reading skills is critical to the success of any Language Arts program. Without sound practice, collaboration and feedback, the program will fail.

In addition to the school library and knowledgeable librarian, teachers and students should have classroom libraries that include a good supply of books, including fiction, informational books, and multiple resources and references. Successful school districts also involve parents in the planning process and share current research findings about Language Arts learning. Unless the community understands curriculum changes, questions will eventually arise that may jeopardize the change process.

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